

## Transcription: Fred Castaneda

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*Today is Friday, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010. My name is James Crabtree. I'll be interviewing Mr. Fred Castaneda. This interview is being conducted at the Stephen F. Austin Building in Austin, Texas, and it is in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for being with us today. Have you got your recorder going?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yes.

*Great. Well sir, it's an honor for us and I guess the first question we usually start with is to tell us a little bit about -*

**Fred Castaneda:** Can I interrupt?

*Yeah, sure.*

**Fred Castaneda:** It's my pleasure to be here, but please don't call me sir, I'm a sergeant.

*All right, OK.*

**Fred Castaneda:** It's something that we always carry from the service, right?

*Gotcha. I guess tell us then a little bit about your background, your childhood, before you went in the service.*

**Fred Castaneda:** I went to, I was born in Mexico. I'm not even a citizen of the United States, and when I was 18 I registered for the draft, and my number was number 29 on the first lottery to Vietnam when they had conscription for the draft.

*You were still subjected to the draft even though you weren't a citizen?*

**Fred Castaneda:** A lot of people don't know about it, but anybody who had a green card, an I-151 card is this called, which is what I have, permanent resident, had the same military obligation as a citizen. Six years, two years on active and four years in the reserve, same thing. That's why they served. One of the things that a lot of people are shall we say surprised is I tell them oh yeah, 25 percent of the folks that were in Vietnam weren't citizens. They were from Columbia and they were from South America and Mexico. They had just gotten their green cards and then they got called up if they were in the first, if their lottery number by date of birth was there. So mine was 29. I was in college at the time. I ran out of money in my college and so guess what, and in those days if you didn't register, then the college was obliged by law to send your name to the draft board and the next thing you know you got an invitation to go. Not to take your physical – induction. So I didn't realize that. I went to take my physical when I got the notice, and I didn't know what was going on, and I went up to a big, big burly sergeant. This guy must have been, he looked like 10 feet tall.

*Where was this?*

**Fred Castaneda:** This was downtown Los Angeles at the induction station, and that's what they called them in those days. They don't have them anymore. But I went to the induction station,

and a big, burly black sergeant, the kind that you would think wears the Smokey the Bear hat, right? And I asked him, I think there's a mistake here, sir, I'm not a citizen. He just said shut up boy, and stand over there and follow the yellow line and go here. Next thing I know toward the end of the day, just like an assembly line, one of the staff, staff \_\_\_\_ stamping something and I go what's this? He says you're gonna get drafted. And I go, what? He says yeah, see you here in 10 days. And yeah, he was right. So it was my first experience that finally it gets to me that this is not a joke, this physical I just took, and when I left the recruiting station, here's this big poster, because the induction station had a recruiting station inside, and usually what they did is a lot of guys came shell-shocked and said woah, I better join and get an MOS -

*Pick their branch or something.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Pick a branch and get an MOS that's not combat so you wouldn't have to go to Vietnam as an infantryman. Well, I walked out and here's this big poster, it was for OCS, Officer Candidate School, and guess what the poster had? Guys were in foxholes and here's this one guy, obviously it was for OCS so he must have been platoon leader, and he's got an M-16 put in the air and he's turning around looking at his guys and saying do this. And I go wait a minute, it was a frontal attack. They were being overrun by VC and it was Vietnam, and I'm going holy mackerel, they aren't kidding. Is that what's going to happen to me? So I was shell-shocked for several days, and then when you're called you don't do anything.

*Did you have any of your family, were you married or did you have your parents or anybody else with you there in LA?*

**Fred Castaneda:** No, I had, like I said I was in college and I just ran out of money. I didn't know what to do. And then I couldn't register, so guess what happened? I got, my number got sent to the draft board.

*Did you have any thoughts about returning back home to Mexico and avoiding the draft?*

**Fred Castaneda:** My parents told me about that and I said no, see, one of the things that happened is I got a full scholarship because I was a straight A student in high school, got a full scholarship to college, but the money ran out because I went to summer school and they counted that towards, for three years of summer school, guess what, I ran out of money and because each summer school counted toward a semester. They said if you would have been smart, you wouldn't have gone to summer school. You would've just used the money. So I said no, if they gave me the money then I've got an obligation to pay them back. They gave me a full scholarship. So I felt it was more of paying my rent, the obligation, and not only that, I'd been living in the country, I had no complaints. I wasn't rich or anything, I was struggling in downtown LA in the barrio, but it gave me the opportunity, I was the only one in my family ever to be in the military.

*So you get the draft notice and you're back there in 10 days, same place. Tell us then what's going through your mind at that point?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Well you realize it's not a game, and the one thing that happened was they had, they gave me an opportunity when I was finally inducted to go airborne, and that was the first thing that I said woah, when I went through my processing in Fort Ord in California which doesn't exist anymore but it used to be a big, huge training center in California, when I went through the processing they do in the first several days you're in the Army, they said boy, you

got scores here. What do you want? And I said National Defense Language Institute. I had a very high score because I took Latin, Greek, I knew Spanish, fluent in languages, so for me it was a natural. They needed people who wanted to be, who should have been translators for in that time Arabic and Russian, and I said fantastic, I'll stay in Monterey at the National Defense Language Institute. You got to be a citizen, got to have a clearance, and guess what. I said well then what about communications? Yeah, you qualify for anything. There's only one problem. You qualify with your tests, battery scores. The only thing you don't qualify is citizenship. And the other things I could qualify were already allotted because too many people were signing up and taking those MOS's away, and I said well what do you got available for me? He said either cook or infantry. I said I'll take infantry. I worked my way in the kitchen through high school and college, and I said never again. So I went in the infantry, took the training and a guy from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne with a very striking uniform came in and he was recruiting guys for the Airborne. I said you know what? I'll go Airborne. It meant staying in the States three weeks longer before you go overseas, because every one of my companies were shipping out to Vietnam, straight out of infantry. So I went Airborne. It was the best thing I could've done. It gave me training, made me hard core, saved my life a couple of times over in Vietnam.

*So did you do your basic training at Fort Ord?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Fort Ord.

*In your platoon, how many of the guys would you say were drafted and how many were volunteers to be there?*

**Fred Castaneda:** I remember the first day they actually said how many guys are draftees and how many guys are volunteer, and the reason that happened is a mean-ass drill sergeant, I mean he was tough as nails, and he said, he came up to this one guy and he was prior service, and he just says OK, I'm gonna be after you, because he was very heavy, prior service Navy, and he says I'm gonna ride you into the ground. And he says how many of you guys volunteer? He says OK, you guys asked for it, you're gonna get it. And then he said how many guys drafted? And then when they raised their hand, he just says well, you guys couldn't help it. And he had a photographic memory. He knew everybody. He remembered who was drafted, who wasn't.

*What percentage of your platoon do you think was drafted?*

**Fred Castaneda:** In those days, about close to half.

*And this was in 1970?*

**Fred Castaneda:** '70. Close to half.

*So at that point, the war was very unpopular and had been going for some period of time.*

**Fred Castaneda:** You had three things that happened – Kent State, the Cambodian incursion, a lot of unrest, the riots that were going on the cities remember, and protests everywhere.

*How long was your basic training?*

**Fred Castaneda:** It was 8 weeks. Then I went to a leadership prep school for 3 weeks, then I went to 8 weeks of AIT, then I went to 3 weeks of jump school at Fort Bragg, and then I started

my first tour in the 82<sup>nd</sup>. Little did I know that if you volunteered for Airborne, they were just prepping you to go overseas and when I got my orders, I went over to Vietnam, I was assigned to the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade which was the brigade known as Sky Soldiers. They were the Airborne unit drawing jump pay in Vietnam. The 82<sup>nd</sup> already left just prior to that. The 101<sup>st</sup> was standing down, so the 173<sup>rd</sup>, the Herd as they're called, that's why, and when I got to Cameron Bay, orders were changed. They said 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, 101<sup>st</sup>, and then all these other units, they said you are all changed orders. You're all going up to Chulai, Hawaii. I didn't know until I got there. The Americal Division had suffered so many casualties from booby traps that when I got to my company, I mean they were very much under strength and needed replacement, so they diverted everybody and sent them up.

*So right out of basic training you joined the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Basic AIT, jump school, then I was assigned to, I mean once you go Airborne, you're assigned either to the 101<sup>st</sup> or 82<sup>nd</sup>. I went to the 82<sup>nd</sup> and I was there for a while, then orders came to go to the Herd. When I got to Cameron Bay, they said nope, you're going to Americal.

*What was it like the first day you arrived in Vietnam? Maybe share with us some of your memories of that day.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yeah, if you could think about somebody coming from the nice temperate of southern California and Los Angeles, right, where it's neither too hot nor too cold, as soon as we got off the plane, and by the way we had a long, long trip. The plane broke down. It was Seaboard World Airlines and it was a charter flight. So when we got there and the doors opened, you walked out, think of yourself as going into a steam bath. That's exactly what it felt like. You know, 110 degrees, 80-90 percent humidity, and it just hits you. We went to the combat center and processed in. The combat center is a three-day training or two and a half day training that they give you as refresher before you as infantry go out on your first mission so you don't get yourself killed. In the combat center they had a refresher of everything, and when they had the booby trap course, the guy came back and this was the day before we were supposed to go out on our first mission, the guy says no training today. You're just gonna have to do your job OJT. Said why? Because last night the Dinks came in and they set real booby traps. In other words, the booby trap course was booby-trapped by the enemy in the evening. They were always infiltrating everywhere. The thing that I couldn't get over is seeing civilian Vietnamese working there and I just said how do you know they're not the enemy? They go, you don't, they probably are some of them. Well why do we hire them? Well, that's the way the government is. So they would hire local civilians and you didn't know who is the enemy, who is not, and when you get rocketed, they knew exactly where we were, they knew everything because they had infiltrated through the enemy. Just like the movie, what was it called, *Good Morning, Vietnam*, where the one guy was playing both sides. So those were the two things that surprised me. The heat was incredible. The day before we went on our mission I was given guard duty. Everybody was given guard duty and it was my first time in the 100-foot towers in Chulai getting sniper fire, rocket attacks, the whole nine yards. The combat center was always being attacked by rockets. And so I just said here's a prelude of things to come, and I didn't sleep at all that night. The next day I went to the helopad and got on a mission. I was the only guy there, the only replacement. The others hadn't caught up yet from Chulai, that was going to my company. And all I remember is I was scared as could be. I didn't know if it was gonna be a hot LZ or not. They landed on top of a rock and a waterfall, a huge boulder on a waterfall. That was the only dry place. The chopper hovered, they told me to get down, I jumped off and slid down the rock into

the water, picked up the C ration and the supplies and the ammo and everything and joined the group. The first thing that happened there was a guy named Tex, and the photographs I think I showed you that he was the machine gunner, and he said welcome. He was happy to see me, so he took me under his wing and then that evening he said here, this is yours. He gave me the pig, the M-16. He said you're the pig man from now on. So he turned it over to me.

*How long had he and most of the guys in your unit been in country?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Eight, nine months. I mean I was brand new. They hadn't had a replacement in four months, yeah, and so I got initiated. Talk about you think about fraternity initiations. I was in a fraternity college. It was worse than that. You're alone, nobody wanted to deal with you, nobody talked with you, and everybody literally what do they call it, harassed you as much as possible. They spit on you. They didn't want to have anything to do with you because you were a liability. You're a newmie, you're a cherry, you're coming into country, you don't know what the heck you're doing, you're going to get them killed. And that's what they all said. They stayed away from me, so the most lonely time in your life where you're not wanted by them, you're not wanted by anybody, you don't know what the heck's going on, nobody will help you. And during the first two missions that I went on, I mean you see your first gory details of what combat is really like there and you find out the war was 80 percent boredom and 20 percent sheer terror. And the other thing, too, is I got cut off from my units because they were humping so fast through the triple canopy jungle, and I don't know if you've ever been in triple canopy jungle, but it's almost like night during the middle of the day because hardly any light gets in. Well I got cut off from my unit. I went the wrong way. I was too slow. I couldn't see the guy in front of me, I went the wrong way, and for that one evening is when I couldn't even see my hand in front of my face, and that was the one evening where in training they told us about it, but you didn't believe it, you couldn't believe it until you experience it, and so I had a grenade with a pin pulled in one hand and I had my bayonet in the other hand, I had a .45 that was on my lap and I had my M-16 right at my side.

*You just, you found a place to sit?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yeah, right in front of a tree and I figured that, you know, your ears play tricks on you so you think that someone's coming especially if there's a stream nearby. You think someone's coming up the stream, and I thought that whoever was going to come was going to take a trip wire and string it across my neck and choke me that way. Well, then I'd take him with me, at least the grenade. So it was my first night of sheer terror being alone. The next day, my squad leader came to me. I used to call him Johnny, Johnny 1<sup>st</sup> Cab, and he was a good man. He was a veteran of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cab Division sent up to reinforce us, too, and he had been in country eight months.

*And they knew you were missing, right, at some point?*

**Fred Castaneda:** He did. Obviously you have to account for your men and he just says aw, damn, Cherry got lost, so he traced back to where, and he was a good tracker, he traced me back the next day. I put the pin back into the grenade. It was M-26 grenades so they were easy to do that, and when I saw him, you know, you couldn't talk, you couldn't do anything. Everything was sign language because you could hear everything in the jungle and you didn't know if the Dinks were out there waiting to get him, and he was out there by himself. He came up to me and he just made a signal to me. You OK? And I said yeah, and he came up to me and he did this number and I guess I'm pointing my finger to my head gear, and so I took off my helmet and

then he grabbed me and he slapped me silly. He was slapping the crap out of me. Not loud, but he was slapping the crap out of me with a closed fist like that, basically saying you idiot, you almost got us, you know, you could've gotten somebody killed. So it was the lesson that I learned again. And here I am, I couldn't do anything right, and that's the way you feel as a newmie and a grunt.

*How old were you at this point?*

**Fred Castaneda:** 21, 22, and I was one of the older guys in the unit. Everybody was 19, 18 years old. After that, on the next hump that we had, all the guys including Grandpa, that was the ex-Hells Angels guy that I didn't like -

*How old was he?*

**Fred Castaneda:** He was 26. He got drafted right before his 26<sup>th</sup> birthday and he was anti-establishment everything. I mean you talk about a guy who was the one that was least cooperative, that was him, and the reason they called him Grandpa was because he had false teeth. He was an ex-Hells Angel, he had false teeth. Anyway, he was always making fun of me. He was always putting me down, and so they had this little initiation where they humped, you know, in the afternoon you get together after all the patrols and you go through your missions and it's called humping the booty. You go from one logger position to the next and you're humping with about 120-130 pounds of stuff on your back, and they humped as fast as they could so that they could leave me behind. Well that's the initiation. You know, you got to keep up with us. Of course you don't so then it's more harassment and more grueling. Well guess what, I got heat exhaustion and started to faint and everything. Of course that was even more you Cherry, you can't even - just like what was that movie where that happened? Charlie Sheen, *Platoon*, remember he had heat exhaustion? Humped too much stuff, didn't take salt pills, same thing with me. I learned from those two lessons and I got the machine gun. I mean you weren't used to carrying so much and these guys were, and so you just had to pack it up and then after our first couple of missions the one thing that I really, I think really initiated me into the club was when we were surrounded on an ambush and I knew that this was it, there was no way we were going to get out, and so I realized at that time I was ready to die and take as many of the enemy with me and protect the other guys, and I did. When you realize that you're not a coward, because everybody is scared - how am I gonna react? Am I gonna freeze? Am I gonna do this? I didn't. Once you're past that, it's almost like your own self initiation that you know you're not a coward and the guys from World War II and Korea, I'm sure they felt the same way before the first taste of enemy contact, and when that happened, it was kind of like a whole new me. Then I was just determined, but I was being acclimated to the weather and everything else and I was doing all the right things afterwards and so I did that and after eight months in country, I was the guy that was taking in the young guys but I wasn't treating them that way.

*Did you ever tell the guys in your platoon that you'd been in college?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Oh, they knew.

*Was that a source of...?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Friction, yeah. The only one.

*You were the only one?*

**Fred Castaneda:** The only one that had any college background. The only other guys had been to college were the officers. That was it. And Grandpa used to call me Chili Bean. And when he saw the Airborne wings on my fatigues, first of all he said what are you doing with some fatigues here? This is what they gave me. And he said no, nobody wears patches here. Tear them off. No patches, no names, no nothing. It was just the complete, like you see, there's a photograph, complete green, no insignia, no nothing. That's what everybody wore including the officers because they didn't want to be a target.

*Yeah, exactly.*

**Fred Castaneda:** And guess who was the number one target whenever we went out on either a sweep patrol or we were humping?

*Radio man?*

**Fred Castaneda:** No, the pig man.

*Oh, because of the weapon.*

**Fred Castaneda:** The M-16. The Dinks hated that because it was good firepower. He was the number one target. The number two target if they could find the RTO, the radio guy, they would get him if they could spot the RTO, was the grenadier. And then the third one was whoever was next to the RTO, and they wouldn't care what side he was on, in front of or behind, because they knew that had to be either the squad leader or the platoon leader. So that's how I got initiated and afterwards like I said, I took a different stance with my men. I didn't baby them, but I didn't humiliate them and make them feel alone. I just kept pressing into their mind that they're gonna get somebody killed, they're gonna get somebody killed, and that's the one thing that really stuck with me afterwards. Unfortunately there was a terrible thing later on with my family and relationships, nobody could afford to make a mistake in my eyes. They said you're a perfectionist. Well, dammit, when you're in the bush, you make one mistake and you're gonna get not only you but other people killed. It wasn't so much me getting killed. You never think about yourself. You think about your buddies, the other guys. Yeah, I don't want to get them killed and that was the one thing that kept me going. It kept me going from let's put it this way, you're scared, you're terrified and everything, but you learn to control it because you learn to put your buddies' lives in front of your own. Think of it as kind of a selfish benevolence because you are more worried about them and you are taking care of them, especially after you've been in country and you start being the mother hen, right? The mother hen of taking care of these guys making sure, you make a commitment to yourself, or I did anyway, that I only get these guys out alive, and when you focus on that, guess what, it takes away from your fear and you don't focus on yourself. And there's a couple of times that you even get careless and you expose yourself needlessly. Nothing happens to you and then you just afterwards when you realize how exposed you were, I'm sure you had the same thing, the shakes and the dry cotton mouth and you realize what could've happened to you that you were exposed and you go geez, I can't do that anymore. So you learn to take care of the other guy and that in turn helps you cope with and not be so scared, because the other guy is scared.

*When you were over there, did you have much contact or word from home, your parents or friends or that sort of thing?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Today, which is during the times of operation Iraqi Freedom and during Freedom Afghanistan, these guys have cellphones, they have Internet. We had no communication except letters, and the letters were picked up on resupply. When a chopper got shot down, we got angry not for the food, not for the ammo, not for the resupplies, it was for mail. Mail was what kept you going, and it would take a month or two, so your letters would get a month or two delayed all the time. Only on resupply would they come and so that was the only contact we had with the outside world. This is a photograph I had of one. We were in the bush, and guess what I was doing. I mean look at what Johnny 1<sup>st</sup> Cab is doing, he's writing a letter, and I was writing a letter, too, and we were sitting on our hammocks there in the mountains and this was after a logger position that we had, so you wrote. But you could only write during the dry season because when monsoon came, it was five, six months of pure wet and unless you were inside a hooch and kept your stuff dry and the only way you kept it dry was you took the PRC-25 radios, the PRC-25 was a radio that had a battery that was maybe 10 inches by 2 inches by 2 inches, 10x3x2, you took the plastic bag that that had which was very thick plastic, and you put all your personal belongings. So literally my personal belongings was in something the size of an envelope, a letter envelope, and it was a plastic bag that carried my wallet, a pen, paper, some of the MPC military payment certificates which was a monopoly like money they had, so there was no greenback allowed, and a few pictures. That's it. That was your whole life. Everything else was all ammo, weapons, food, everything all equipment. That was the only part that you had that was personal. No phone calls. We knew that in the rear of the REMPs, you know, the rear echelon, the guys, the REMPs had access to a watts line in Chulai and in Danang and in Saigon, and that means that those guys once a week had a five-minute phone call to the States, but it was like 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning in the States. So those guys had contact and they were divvying them out on a bootleg basis, so if you knew who they were, it's like the Radar O'Reilly in the MASH series, if you were in good with Radar, he'd get you one watts line call for five minutes, but it always for the guys in the rear. The infantrymen were spat upon and mistreated by, and especially looked down upon by the guys in the rear, and some of the hardcore NCOs that just treated them like crap. As soon as you'd get back to the rear, rest? Excuse me, no. You're out there pulling shit burning detail, and literally you had to pour fuel and burn the feces from the half drums of 55-gallon diesel fuel that's filled with stuff so you can burn it. You did that and then you pulled guard or you were out there digging trenches or filling sandbags, but you never had rest.

*How long would you be out in the field and then what was a typical mission like for you?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Some were 18 days. That was pretty short. Others were 30 days and there was one that was 51 days.

*Then when you'd get back, how long would you usually have back in the rear?*

**Fred Castaneda:** It all depended who your battalion commander was. One battalion commander we had, Major O'Brien, great guy, he would literally on the helopad, and right now I'm showing James what it was like, the helopad was here and he would have a jeep with trailer pointing this way and another jeep with trailer pointing that way so everybody, and he was right here in the middle, so it was shaped like a V. Everybody had to go past him to get past the helopad to go to the showers and everything else to try and clean up. And he shook everybody's hand and there was what do you call it, a cold soda and water in the trailers. We would get back there and then he would tell us when our next mission was. We'd either have one or two nights in the rear. And if he was there, when he was our battalion CO, at least he respected the troops. What he did was he said hey guys, there's gonna be a floor show tonight at the club, the enlisted

men's club, thank you for serving, thank you for coming on this mission, and then there's some showers, clean uniforms, go ahead. And usually it would be only one night. They wouldn't mess with us too much if we had one night. So we'd go straight to the showers. Your clothes were so tattered and dirty and caked with mud and just filthy that you threw them in a pile. They were either burned because they were beyond repair, and then you'd go to the ones that were washed. These were the ones that the REMPs left, and so there was a whole pile of fatigue jackets and a whole pile of fatigue trousers and socks. Guess what you would do. You would fight to see which one you grabbed, and if it fits you, fine. If it didn't, too bad, that's what you got stuck with until the next time you came in the rear. So if it was Major O'Brien, you know what the EM club was like? It was a parachutist tent and then we used those big, huge spools, wooden spools for cable, that was a table. Ammo cases were our chairs and then they had a big, huge pallet on the side that somebody had nailed together. That was the bar, and that was our EM club. If we went to a place that had like the Navy or the Air Force or some of the Army bases in Americal back in Chulai, then they actually had some Vietnamese rock-n-roll band come in. They'd bring a speaker and of course the music they had piped in was in those days an 8-track player running on batteries, that kind of stuff. So that was the extent of our rest and we would get liquor that night. So we would by liquor and I think it was like a quarter a glass or five dollars for a fifth of whatever they had, 3.2 beer that's been sitting there for years. And maybe some fresh C-rats and fresh ammo. You'd try and get drunk and you couldn't. So you'd stay up late playing cards, being with your buddies, and at 6 o'clock the next morning you're out at the helopad and they're taking you out on another mission. So sometimes when we went out for long days we'd get two or three days in the rear, but guess what you do? Pull guard, burn shit, you'd do all this kind of stuff. So we actually when it was that way, when we were off guard and we had like three or four hours in between the next assignment, we'd go and pick fights. We'd get into fights just so that the commanding officer would punish us by sending us out the next day so that we wouldn't stay in the rear. We didn't want to be in the spit, you know, guys were spit polishing their jungle boots in starched fatigues and we couldn't take it. We said get us out of here, because once you get used to the bush, it's a whole different way. You had the garrison way and then you had what it's like to be in the field.

*You mentioned the Americal Division. Tell us a little bit about that unit and its history.*

**Fred Castaneda:** The Americal Division was formed in World War II. Americal means the Americans in New Caledonia. They fought in Buenville, they fought in Guadalcanal, and they also were involved during the Korean War. The Americal was the 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division under the southern cross, and it had a very distinctive blue patch. It was the largest, by the way. I found this out later on. It was the largest infantry division as far as strength in Vietnam. They had 24,000 or 23,000-25,000 men, and no other division had that many at one time. Well, there were three brigades in Americal – the 198<sup>th</sup>, the 196<sup>th</sup>, and the 11<sup>th</sup>. I was in the 196<sup>th</sup>, the light infantry brigade. The Americal had the Quang Nai, Quang Tin provinces. They also had responsibilities for the Ashaw Valley, Hebduk, Happy Valley, and other places in I-Corps. Vietnam was divided into four sections – I-2, 3 & 4 Corps. I-Corps being the north, 4-Corps being the south by the Mekong Delta. We were in the north, 28 miles from the ocean border, so we operated a lot and of course, everyone will tell you we never went to Laos, but we spent most of our time there crossing over. You couldn't tell what was which. It was just hills, valleys, mountains. So the Americal spent their time up there in the most heavily booby-trapped area of Vietnam. The reason why our unit was so decimated when I got there, you know how many people there were in the entire company when I got there as a replacement? Then they had four months of dry, no replacements because of what was going on and because they couldn't get

people trained fast enough. There were 36 men in the entire company. That was including the clerks, the cooks -

*And normally a company is 150 -*

**Fred Castaneda:** 150 to 200 in an infantry unit that size. And so here as 36, you can imagine that they only had something like 30 guys in the bush, and that was counting the platoon leaders, right? So when I got there, I was initiated and thrown in. Then they started all coming in droves. The reason why they were so decimated wasn't because a lot of them were killed in action. They were wounded in action, booby traps, and we're talking about explosive booby traps, we're talking about grenades going off, talking about 500-lb. bombs set off as booby traps. The ones that weren't exploded in a B-52 strike, mostly the stuff that we left through air strikes and everything else, they would repurpose it. They were resourceful, the Dinks were. And the Americal had the most casualties from booby traps, and they were the most shall we say psychologically affected, and when you see your buddies get hit with booby traps, you start slowly gathering in yourself this vengeance, this animosity toward the enemy, this hatred, and you just want to get even, especially with booby traps, because you're scared with a horror because you never know when it's going to hit you. It wasn't just explosives. We had bouncing betty's, we also had, do you know what the fly swatters were?

*I know the bouncing betty's, but no, what are the fly swatters?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Fly swatters were bamboo sticks that were put on a series of wood that formed almost like a platform, the pungy stakes were coming perpendicular for it, and as soon as you had a trip wire come swinging down from the trees or swinging across and you've got these 20, it's either 5x5 matrix of pungy sticks that are dipped in human feces to be poisonous, they would come in to get you in the chest or below the waist. Or you'd go into a pungy pit. You know what the pungy pit was?

*Pungy pits, yeah.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yeah, they got the same type of bamboo stakes dipped in human feces but they are covered over and if you stepped into it, your foot would go through. Well they put a steel plate in the boots, in the combat boots, so that didn't happen. So guess what they did? The pungy sticks were no longer vertical. They were horizontal and it was just almost like a bear trap. You'd step in it and these pungy stakes would hit you from the side where it was just canvas, so and guess what, you usually would have to amputate the foot because by the time the chopper got there and got you a Medivac, there was already bacteria forming and there was an infection and it was pretty hard to save your foot. And you'd see that. So you'd form this terrible vengeance, just huge animosity, a hatred for the enemy. So what happened with one of the brigades there in 1968 under the command of Captain Medina and the platoon leader was William Calley, they went into a little village of Melai. They had had some of these casualties. There was a PBS documentary about Melai massacre, and if you saw it, don't believe a lot of that because it was a point of view, the media point of view of these people trying to create their own history and agenda. They had just one interview with one of the guys that was there. I don't know if you saw it and he said I was there and yeah, when you're over there and it's them or you and you couldn't tell who they were and if you'd just seen your buddies get killed, of course you're gonna be wanting to wipe them all out. And that's what happened. They massacred over 100 civilians, just wiped them all out. The guys were who the ones that spilled it, and this stuff happened all the time, but the guys who spilled the beans were the chopper

pilots. Of course they weren't infantry. They didn't go through all that. They didn't have that anger building up because once you have that anger built up, I'm sure in the training that you went through, you were in the Marine Corps, right? In the training you went through, what did you always say when you sat down for chow? In your boot camp. What did the DI's always make you say before you sit down for chow? Kill, kill, kill.

*Oh, we said that all the time, yeah, but not at chow. Yeah, we said that all the time.*

**Fred Castaneda:** The guy I talked to said even at chow time you had to say kill, kill, kill altogether in unison before you were allowed to sit down and have chow. So you built that up, except this time you were living through it. You're not just saying it as part of esprit d'corps. You're actually living through it and you see your buddies wiped out? Well what's happening to the psyche of guys like William Calley and the guys around him? It's almost just like when you see a movie like *Ten Commandments*, what did the pharaoh say when he gave the order to destroy them all? That was kind of everybody had just had it, said get of him. Because you don't know who the enemy was. As a matter of fact, in this month's issue of I don't know if it's *Disabled Vets* magazine or the *American Legion* or the VFW magazine, but they had an article about – oh no, it was the *Vietnam* magazine. There's a magazine called *Vietnam*, it's for Vietnam vets. I subscribe to it and in this month's issue that just came out two days ago, they had an article about the children in Vietnam how you couldn't trust them because what they would do is they would strap grenades and they would, or they would tell the child to here, here's something, so they would have like a gift or a done that was really a grenade, pull the pin and take this to the GI and so the GI would get blown up. Too much of that and especially the guys, I know Bobby Briscoe, he was in the Americal Division and he wrote the book called *Jungle Warriors*, he talks about the guys and the day before they leave going to the Dink laundry so they can get their khakis so they can look sharp when they board the plane and go home, and on their way to the laundry they get blown up by mortars. So a lot of what the Dinks wanted to do is they always wanted to hit the planes going home, demoralize the troops and say after one year you made it this far and you get hit. Guys waiting on the tarmac waiting to board the aircraft and they'd get hit and killed after one year in Vietnam. So when Lieutenant Calley and guys got to Melai, they wiped out a lot of civilians. Well, it hit the press, the media got a hold of it and you can imagine the field day they had. And by the way, this was before Kent State shootings, this was before the Cambodian incursion, this was before a lot of that stuff just added.

*Were you aware of that when you were in Vietnam? The Melai massacre had already occurred?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yeah, and everything else, but by the time you settle yourself in country, you know what it's all about and you just say yeah, the media, the reporters.

*After a while when you're there -*

**Fred Castaneda:** Let me just finish about the media, we hated the media. The reporters, the journalists. The only way I can even describe how we felt about the media, the movie *Hamburger Hill*? You remember when they were coming down the hill and here's this reporter, a real snotty ass and that's exactly the way the media were and that's exactly how we felt about them.

*Did you see many of them while you were there?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yeah, UPI. Like I said, on one mission they caught me in two photographs. When I was crossing a river and I got there and they took a photograph of me, and like they said no, do this, and I just looked at them and I go get the hell out of my sight. And then another one where we were crossing a river, it was chest high, and I needed somebody, I was trying to 203, which was a spider, the blooper, the M-16 with the grenade launcher, I needed some help because I was being taken and most of the guys were taller than I was, and I carried a lot of weight and so they had to help me across. Well, he snapped a picture there. And there was one time where I hated the reporter from API and UPI because we knew that they were gonna do whatever they did with Calley, they were definitely looking for stuff to write for us, that I went up to 'em and I looked at 'em and I just said to 'em, I said you know what? The Dinks are gonna get you. Charlie's gonna get you. And I said if he doesn't, I'll shoot you myself and then we'll claim it was the VC. So if we have a firefight, consider yourself dead. And so I could see that he was scared. This was the first day he went out with us, because he was acting all condescending and arrogant and everything, so everybody hated him and I just put it right, I said you stick around here you're gonna get killed and it's gonna be an enemy kills you and it's gonna be one of us and we're gonna be glad. And so that evening, I knew I was hearing something out in the, there was a stream close by, the pig, the machine gun, always got the sector fire that was going to be covering the most ground, so I was always on guard first. Later on that evening, I thought I heard something in the river and I said you know what, I'm going to scare this guy. So I took a grenade and threw it over, and he was like on my left. And guess what, boom! I didn't yell frag out or anything, I just wanted to scare the shit out of him, and it did. And the next day I said you walk in front of me, when we're going from the logger position to the next logger position and he was supposed to go on patrol, I said you walk in front of me, and I smiled at him, and I said walk in front of me. He was scared. Well the resupply chopper came in that afternoon and guess what? He jumped. He left half his stuff behind. He just jumped to get out of there because he knew that he wasn't gonna make it. That's how much we hated them because of what they did in the media, and by the way, stuff like this happened all the time. In World War II, prisoners weren't taken. Korea, prisoners weren't taken. We knew what they did to us, and so we did that to them and that's why we knew we were never going to be taken prisoner. Like I said, when I got cut off, I wasn't going to be taken prisoner. I'll blow myself up if they came over. That's why I held a grenade with the pin pulled all night, and you do that. You'll wonder how could I do that? Well guess what, the time goes by very slowly and the jungle is a dark place and you hear all sorts of stuff at night, and your heart never stops beating. It's one of the scariest, most terrifying moments you ever have in your life because you think these guys are crawling right up to you and they're going to stab you or they're going to choke you, they're going to do something, you know, and you can't see them. So the Americal Division got the bad rap. Lieutenant Calley, he was a scapegoat, and after that they deactivated the division, '71 got rid of it and they were never gonna activate it. '71 November, they deactivated the Americal Division, got rid of it, and it's never been put up, but it was a good division full of a lot of crazy guys. The men were good in it. They got I don't know how many medals of honor, which is about more than any other division in the Army, and they were the largest division but they were deactivated because of the bad press. And by the way, if there's one thing that happened, now the Americal wasn't the only one that did it. I talked to guys in the 1<sup>st</sup> Cab, guys in the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry, geez, they were wiping out civilians left and right. I guess it's the old adage, the only mistake that they made was they let somebody see them do it, and then the media got a hold of it and that was the one thing. But it's happened in every conflict. I'm sure it happened in the Middle East, because those things always happen when you don't know who the enemy is. You know, you shoot first and ask questions later, especially when you have the experience of not shooting first and being the nice guy and thinking that you're going to be playing by the rules, and then your buddy gets killed because that little kid had a grenade or

because the female, and by the way, the majority of the Vietcong that we fought were females. The reason why? Most of the guys were taken up north, so we fought against females and that was a terrible readjustment. Talk about what do you call it, a culture shock, here you've been raised to believe that women are gonna be treated fairly and little kids, and they are the enemy. The women are the intentional enemy. The kids are the manipulated enemy, and they are used as human booby traps to blow you guys up. So your whole method shifts, just like ambushes. Ambush is what, getting somebody from behind. It's not what we were trained to do, but guess what, I was on ambushes almost every, because I had the machine gun, I was on ambushes almost every other night in the bush.

*Was there ever a point during your time there that you just kind of became fatalistic about everything, that if something's gonna happen, it's gonna happen and do you think if you did become fatalistic that that was kind of the best way of dealing with things that were beyond your control?*

**Fred Castaneda:** You don't think about it. It just happened. When you become fatalistic, it's usually when you start looking like this, and I'm pointing to the photograph when I was at Chulai after a mission where we had lost some men. What do you call that stare?

*1,000-yard stare.*

**Fred Castaneda:** It's a 1,000, and look at it, the 1,000-yard stare, that's when you become fatalistic, because all you want to do is get even and you start taking chances. There's a time in Vietnam where it just gets to you. You think yeah, I have all these memories of being back in the world and going to college and having a family and relationships, but it seems so foreign. It's like you watched a movie. It's not really real. It never happened. I always felt like I grew up just like a piece of bamboo in the jungle, and Uncle Sam came and he picked me up and threw me in a green uniform and that was it. I felt that my whole life had always been around and centered around being in the jungle and being an infantryman. You lose all consciousness. It's kind of a surrealistic feeling that you have about saying yeah, I do have a life, and that's why I called it the world because it really was another world, it was like a twilight zone. You don't have any recollection or you don't have any feeling. You're totally detached, and when that happens, you start getting a 1,000-yard stare, and then you start getting the vengeance factor. I just want to kill as many of them as possible. And then pretty soon you get believing the little saying that we had every time, how do you get through all that stuff? How do you not worry about going through it day after day? If you had that feeling, just say it don't mean nothing. And there were guys there and you got to see who they were, where they really didn't care whether they lived or died. They were already dead inside and they just wanted to get out in the bush and get into a firefight and get killed. They had a death wish, and they didn't care who they killed. It was us or them. They were already dead and you could tell by the eyes, and if you went to the 1,000-yard stare and you started feeling that way, before you got to that point you just didn't care. It don't mean nothing. And we'd go to the rear, we'd get into fights just for the hell of it. We'd go around the room and say if you ain't a grunt, you ain't shit. Then people would say, what do you mean? And we got in fights with Marines, we got in fights with the Navy, we got in fights with the Air Force. We were thrown out of the Air Force enlistments club and the Navy club for starting fights and breaking stuff, and of course the company commander would say, you're going out tomorrow morning and we would be happier than everything. When you finally leave the bush because your orders came through and you don't believe you're going home – when you finally leave the bush and go home, you don't want to leave.

*And when you finally went home, you went home individually, right, not as a unit?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yeah.

*I think that was kind of one of the differences in Vietnam was that previous wars just like the current wars, you went as a unit and you came back as a unit, but in Vietnam for whatever reason, you would go in as individual and you would leave individually, right?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yup. When I got my orders like I said, I flew into Cameron Bay by myself. I got to know a couple of guys at the combat center, but I never saw them again. They went to different brigades. And so I had two days with one guy starting to finally feel like I'm getting to know somebody, right? But you're an individual there. And then you get to your unit, you form the friendships and you form the long lasting friendships you had with your guys, and when you come home, you're separated from them. I didn't want to leave my unit. I wanted to go home with Reggie, my buddy. Him, Reggie. I wanted to go home with him or with Bob. Reggie, there he is. And so much so that I didn't want to go. My first sergeant forced me to go out of the bush to the fire base, and I was waiting for orders in the fire base and you know, Vietnam had fire bases and so what was I doing, pulling guard and security in the fire base for those 8-inch and 155's, the cannon. And then Reggie joined me after that. But they called me first. Your orders are up, you got to go. You're going home. I go no, I don't want to go. I want to go with Reggie. I couldn't do that. So I went back DROS, which was what, date of expiration return from overseas service, it was a processing out, and I got home, I got back to the States but guess what? I stayed in Seattle because we flew into McCord Air Base right next to Fort Lewis in Seattle, and I stuck around for three days waiting for him, seeing every flight coming in because they were having a massive pullout then, to see if Reggie would be there. That's how much we wanted. And then the first thing I did when I got back to Fort Bragg is I got reassigned back to the 82<sup>nd</sup>, I asked to go back. That's how much, you got so acclimated to the field that you didn't want to leave because of the, I don't know if that answered your question or not. But coming home was just a terrible, and then when you got home, guess what was waiting for us, when I finally went to the airport in my dress greens that were reissued to me at that time, same dress greens that you see in some of the photographs. When I went to the Seattle airport, here's 70 or 80 long-haired hippie shits protesting and you know, James, the reason I have this mustache, I don't like mustaches as you can see, but it covers a scar I got. I got nicked by the side, the corner of one of the picket signs, baby killers. Picket signs of one of the long-haired hippie shits that was protesting. He was hitting me over the back, over the neck, over the head, and we were just dressed in dress greens, right.

*At the airport?*

**Fred Castaneda:** At the airport, the shore patrol, the Navy, and there in Seattle had to come in and break this thing up and take us to the gates. They couldn't touch the demonstrators. They had to take us away and hide us and run to the gate and say get on board the bird, quick. And when I got on board the bird, the stewardess brings me a towel. And I go what's this for? She goes, just points to my lip. Guess what, I got a cut, a gash right across there. So they hit me right across the lip and I said this is what we came home for? And they were throwing bags, balloons full of urine at us, yeah. That was the welcome home we got. And so what's the first thing, you get that welcome home, you go back to your unit and you're in garrison duty and spit and polish and you just go something's wrong here. No rehabilitation, no decompression, no nothing. You're just expected to adapt immediately. And we were suffering from I guess now they know you're going to be suffering from PTSD and readjustment pains, right? Didn't have

that there, nobody cared, and so here we were, maladjusted. That's the only way I can say to you or describe to you how I felt, totally maladjusted.

*This was in '71?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yeah, so I mean pretty bad stuff.

*How much longer did you stay in the Army?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Until '74. The 82<sup>nd</sup>, when I got there, totally maladjusted. Then I had one really good, two instances. We were the first ones to be deployed to the Middle East in 1973. Nobody knows it. It was one of these things during the \_\_\_\_\_ War where the Russian paratroopers were going to cut, I don't know if you're aware of it, but the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula, this is when Sadat started the war to take back -

*Didn't Nixon order an airlift of some sort?*

**Fred Castaneda:** It wasn't an airlift, a deployment.

*OK, but I know he did an airlift as well into Israel.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Oh he had guys supplying Israel from Germany, not a problem, but what happened was he found out that the Russian Airborne which takes 48 to 60 hours to mobilize, they were asked to join the fight by the Egyptians. In the Golan Heights, one brigade of the 82<sup>nd</sup> was going to jump in to reinforce the Israelis there and prevent a mass overrun. And then ours, our brigade was going to jump into the Sinai, a night jump in the desert in the Sinai because the Egyptian 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was almost completely surrounded by the Israelis. There was just, the pincer movement lacked one valley and the Israelis couldn't hold it because they were getting, and they had armor – the armor was trying to get out of this pincer movement because the Israelis were going to annihilate them. Well, we were going to jump to have the blocking force there to force the pincer movement, and then supposedly we wanted them to surrender, but the Israelis said no prisoners, and so we were gonna jump there in the evening. Well we were deployed in two hours – for anybody who has ever seen movies like this, you don't believe it can happen, but the 82<sup>nd</sup> was mobilized in two hours to go in there with brand new weapons you'd never seen. It was incredible. It was like clockwork. Everybody pisses, moans, and complains about the service and all this, but when the time comes, everybody reacts, they do their job. There was a plane taking off of pulp air base every 30 seconds, another one landing, take out more troops. I was on the tarmac and we were ready to go and I saw the parachutes and then I saw the desert fatigues and everything being loaded, and I just go holy mackerel, this is for real. We had the briefing while we were on the tarmac and 60 percent casualties expected on the drop zone there. They may have surface missiles they were going to be aiming, I mean it was going to be horrible. And so after that, I said well I'm going in with all newbies. I was reassigned to a company in a different battalion that needed experienced combat vets because everyone else was shake-n-bakes, they were just out of NCO and never been to combat. So they reassigned me. I knew nobody. I said here's Vietnam all over again. They're going in with green guys that I'm not familiar with, and I'm an NCO, I was sergeant at that time. Guess what, this is it. I had already just decided and I resigned myself, I'm gonna get killed. They're gonna get me killed. And I didn't like the odds anyway. I was doing a night jump in the desert. What happened was Nixon called Brezhnev on the red line, on the hot line, and he said look, we already know you guys, we know where you're going to jump, our intelligence knows exactly when you're going to get there

because it takes you that long to mobilize. Our 82<sup>nd</sup> is on the way already. The 101<sup>st</sup> will follow. We're going to be the ones shooting you down as you parachute in. Do you really want to do this? And by the way, the air base you were going to airlift in, it's already ours. And Brezhnev said you know, what do we do now? Brezhnev knew the 82<sup>nd</sup> and the 101<sup>st</sup> would be there all the time. And so they just said why don't we just let these two parties fight it out. Let's not get involved. And so that's what happened. The guys that were already taking off on their way to El Torohon, Spain, because in Spain, we would land at El Torohon, refuel, that's when they'd be issued their weapons, ammo and everything to make a full combat and so we were going to jump into the Golan Heights with full combat gear. They were told to turn back. I was on the tarmac and they just said stand down, it's been called off, and I felt so relieved and I just said you know what, I don't want to go through this again. I don't want to go through this again over and over and over, especially with green guys. So that's when I decided not to make it a career and get out of the service.

*Did you come to Texas at that point?*

**Fred Castaneda:** No, I went back to California after I got out of the service. I was instructor at the Recondo School, reconnaissance commandos at Fort Bragg. Now they call it Pre Ranger training, that's what it's called. So I was instructor there, and then I extended for a little bit more time because I wanted to get out of training. 82<sup>nd</sup> just trains, trains, trains all the time, for everything – jungle, desert, mountain, everything – and I wanted to get out of it because I couldn't take garrison duty. I asked to go back to Vietnam. Can you believe it? I asked to go back, and at that time the Army was saying, especially after all the furor about Cambodia and everything, and Calley and the Americal Division massacre, they said anybody who wants to go back is mentally unstable or can be deemed, so all requests were denied. And so they only took raw recruits. Well, after it was denied, I saw another thing and this was the best thing to help me, the 82<sup>nd</sup> was going into testing of the volunteer Army. It was still a draft Army, but they were testing the things. One of these was hey, we'll recruit people from the home towns in urban areas and we'll get them to sign contracts, because there was no contract before. So I got into the program and I was to recruit young men for three different things – volunteer to join the Army, volunteer to go Airborne, volunteer to spend your first 18 months after training into the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. So I put 156 young men into parachute harnesses. I'm Mexican by birth, I speak Spanish as a native language.

*Where did you do your recruiting?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Florida, Texas, California, Puerto, Rico – I mean all the Latin American – and even Hawaii believe it or not.

*So how long were you recruiting for?*

**Fred Castaneda:** About 18 months. And so late '72 to '74, and when I recruited, it changed my whole focus to the Army. That was if anything a readjustment for me because I was aided by believing what I was doing, and I was recruiting the Latinos from that time. I was recruiting them but not to go into combat. I recruited them and told them here, look at the specialties you get. With the new volunteer Army you're going to get a contract signed. You can be a diesel mechanic, you can be this, and you have a job waiting for you when you get out, and the educational benefits, they were starting to up them, too, so look what you get afterwards. Go to college. And oh by the way, when you're in Fort Bragg, you know about the U.S. Armed Forces Institute, its' a school for all branches of the military and you can go to school during the day and

take things like sociology, personnel management, business, and at night, too, and get college. And I went to the Raleigh, North Carolina Chamber of Commerce and I got all these tourism books saying if you go to Fort Bragg, look what you have just several hours away – the mountains, the beaches, you got all this wonderful area. So I recruited that way. I put 156 young men into parachute harnesses. And what's funny is that one of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne meetings here for the association, I met a fellow that I hadn't seen in many years. He was at that time, was he a brigade commander? Yeah, I think he was a brigade commander, or a battalion commander, and I had seen him in the area where I had my major, and he passed away now, Major Francis McGrew was head of the hometown recruiting program, and I gave him a trinket that we were creating as far as marketing material, trinkets and trash we called them, so I gave it to him and he goes hmm, OK. Well, at one of the 82<sup>nd</sup> meetings, he recognized me and he said I'm giving this back to you. So he remembered that I was doing hometown recruiting for that time, and his name was Major Guy Malloy. I mean Major General. He was the commanding general, two-star general of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division during the Iranian crisis in '79. The 82<sup>nd</sup> had planned to do a military parachute jump into Tehran airport and rescue the hostages. That was nixed after Carter had fouled up the -

*Yeah, eagle claw, helicopters crashed -*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yeah, after that they canceled it because they said no, we can't afford to have another disaster, and the 82<sup>nd</sup> said you should've let us go in first. But anyway, so that's the only time I seen him and it was my decompression at that time because I started really believing the 82<sup>nd</sup>, and then I got out of the service in '74.

*How did you wind up in Texas?*

**Fred Castaneda:** Went back to California and I finished my school, got my MBA, got hired by IBM right after my MBA, and then part of IBM had me transferred to Florida, Boca Raton, Florida; and then I went back to California and then I got assigned to Texas in 1988, so it's what, been 20 something years, 22 years. First Dallas, then here. I've been here almost 20 years.

*That's great.*

**Fred Castaneda:** And working for IBM, just got laid off a year and a half ago.

*And now you're very active though with the veteran's community.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yeah, let me tell you what happens to combat vets, especially from Vietnam. It's at this age when they are in their 40's and 50's and 60's that they realize that and especially if they get treated, that it wasn't their fault and they finally see what the psychosomatic results of war are, now that the VA trains them saying it wasn't you. This is the normal result of what you are suffering from, and when you are in a PTS, I don't know if you go to PTSD groups?

*No, I don't personally, no -*

**Fred Castaneda:** OK, well you go to a PTSD group, you open up a little bit, you start trusting them. You don't talk about combat. You just talk about the things that you are suffering from, you know, the nightmares, the panic attacks, all that stuff, and you think that you're alone, and all of a sudden everybody goes you, too? Every single one of them, every single one of us are suffering from the same thing but we just were scared, and that's why you have broken

relationships, broken marriages, the whole nine yards. So when you realize that, I realized I had to go and take a step further. I was in Raleigh, North Carolina, IBM had a plant there at Research Triangle Park, it was a sunny afternoon, I got through with everything and all of a sudden I go gosh, something is calling me. 75 miles away, guess what's there? Fort Bragg. So I drove to Fort Bragg, got back on the base first time in 28, 30 years, and I'm just going wow, the memories it brought. And then I wanted to go to the PX, I couldn't buy anything because I'm not a retiree and I didn't have a card that says you're in the Armed Forces, so there's a little E3 private, private first class, and I asked him do you think you can go in there and just buy me some insignia. This is what I'm looking for. I went in the store, I saw what it was, but they won't let me buy it. He said yeah but I'll have to go back to my barracks. So he drove me to the barracks. During that time, five-minute drive to his barracks, he thanked me for serving. First time in 30 years that I ever heard a thanks, and it just, and he, and not only that, he said what you guys went through, I know could never be anything we go through. I really have to hand it to you, I look up to you, I admire you guys. Thank you. And he had had uncles that served in Vietnam as well. So that did it for me. It was kind of like the breaking of the ice. It was the beginning of a new era, and I said you know what? I went back to the shopping center after I had been to Fort Bragg and I felt good about myself. Then there's this poster, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, and this shopping center guess what it was, a recruiting station. So I'm looking at the poster, staring in another world because obviously new equipment from Desert Storm and all this, and here comes an E-6 sergeant comes walking out and he's got the 82<sup>nd</sup> always wore berets, he was wearing the garrison cap with the glider and parachute patch which meant Airborne. And I just go "Airborne!" He looks at me and I saw that he had been with the 82<sup>nd</sup>. So we talked for about a half hour and he takes me into the recruiting station and then he had a big, huge flag, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne flag, and I said where did you get that? He said you can get it at the PX. Really? Says here, took it down and handed it to me. It's yours. Then he told me you ought to join the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Association, and he gave me all the reasons and I joined. After that, I said man, I've been throwing away my time hiding myself, withdrawing myself from everything. I need to get back. So I joined the Veterans organization. I've been bouncing around because every time I joined one, found out that it's just like any other organization, you got politics, you got clicks, you got this and that and everything, or it's too far away. The 82<sup>nd</sup> was down in San Antonio and I couldn't do that. I joined the Texas Association of Vietnam Veterans. That was clear across town. I couldn't go to their meetings. So I give back now with two organizations. I'm now the commander of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division Association which covers San Antonio all the way to Fort Hood.

*That's great.*

**Fred Castaneda:** We're recruiting guys there because it's not just for 82<sup>nd</sup>, it's all Airborne, so even Marines who are recon, Navy guys or Seals, Air Force, that's TS, the guys from the 101<sup>st</sup>, and the paraBrits from WWII are part of this. So anybody who has jump wings or has served in the 82<sup>nd</sup> can be part of it, and so I recruit members there and we're having meetings and we're trying to give back to the community, especially Wounded Warriors. And then another one that I got involved with several years ago is the Combat Infantrymen Association, strictly for Army because the one thing is you have to have a what -

*Combat Infantryman Badge.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Right, CIB, which is only infantry and only if you've been up close and personal with the enemy, and in firefight or small arms exchange. So I deal with guys there, and

guess what, a lot of the folks that I met at the very beginning, Americal veterans. Talk about coming home, right? Coming home and seeing the guys that were -

*And since that division is gone, so it probably means even more to have alumni or association for the veterans to get together from that unit.*

**Fred Castaneda:** It is, and they're very close. Guys from the Americal stick together. They just had their regional reunion last month in May in San Antonio. Let me tell you, one phone call in just a weekend and 60 guys showed up. I mean it's that sort of thing. And the division will never be activated. There's 3,000 members that are still active, most of them from Vietnam, some WWII guys, but it's sad. Whereas the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division Association, they've got a pool of 18,000 men to pull from, so they're always going to be refreshing. But I give back to the veterans community with the Wounded Warrior program, the outreach program, sitting down and talking to guys from the 82<sup>nd</sup> or from the 101<sup>st</sup> that have come back and they're paratroopers, and when I talk to them, I don't talk, I listen. And as I'm listening to them, guess what I'm doing? I'm looking in the mirror and I'm saying damn, it's almost as if I feel like I'm in their shoes all over again because they're going through a lot of what I went through. I don't know if you've seen, you served in which - ?

*Iraq, Marine Corps.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Which campaign? Was it Desert Storm or OEFOI?

*OIF.*

**Fred Castaneda:** OK, so it's just like the guys who served in Desert Storm would be talking to somebody who just came back from Iraq or Afghanistan and guess what, they think they're looking in the mirror, they see, they feel the same type of resurgence. Especially because these guys have been through it, they know what we've been through or they think they know what we've been through, and a lot of them say the same thing. They say gosh, you guys in Vietnam, no communications with the family, you had to carry everything in the mountains, the desert, in that kind of sweltering heat or monsoon rain, and not only were you in combat all the time, but you also had to deal with the VC, with the locals who were just like the Middle East. You had to deal with both of them all the time, not just for 30 days during the campaign. We go yeah, that's the way it was. You just adapt to it. And of course we always say WWII guys who fought in the Pacific, the Americal, the Marines, we know what it was like because we fought in the same jungles.

*That's right.*

**Fred Castaneda:** So I don't know what more I could tell you about the Americal, but right now I don't think they're going to reactivate the division. The guys will probably, there's a legacy now, a project for the Americal divisions, but if you talk to any Americal veteran, especially guys like Bobby Briscoe, do you know who he is?

*No, I don't.*

**Fred Castaneda:** OK, well he's the one that wrote the book *Jungle Warriors*, and lives down here, too. They're making a movie out of his book that he wrote. The book is called *Jungle*

*Warriors*. One of the ways that I had a little bit of closure is I actually did the audio narration of the book.

*Oh that's great.*

**Fred Castaneda:** I'm showing you now the CD that you can order or download the files, and the book *Jungle Warriors* which I'm showing you here. That's Bobby Briscoe, and it was his account of the Americal and the reason I did the audio narration, I didn't read the book first. I just opened it up and I started talking into the microphone and narrating the book. It took me a long time to get through it because there were times I just stopped and literally I was just not in tears, but I was crying inside so much because it brought back the memories. And sure it was tough during the time I was narrating the book, I started, had more nightmares and stuff like that, but when you talk to veterans like this you understand what they went through and there's a common bond that you have because you've been through that and you understand. So anytime I see anybody who has a CIB, right away I just know what they've been through. And now they don't give the CIB's like water because they have that combat action badge or close combat badge.

*The Marine Corps has what they call a CAR, Combat Action Ribbon.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Well they've had that for years.

*But I don't know what the equivalent -*

**Fred Castaneda:** The Army has something called a Close Combat Badge. It's a dagger with a wreath around it, and that's for the females basically, at least I think it was. The combat medics had their own badge. But the Close Combat Badge was you can't give a combat infantryman's badge to everybody because your MOIs had to be 11 Bravo infantry which I think in Marine Corps it's about 03 –

*03-11.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Yeah, something like that. So you had to have been that, but they wanted a badge to give to females, so they gave a Close Combat Badge and you know what close combat means? You were in a convoy, someone took a shot at you, and they were a bad shot and you were lucky, they missed. OK, the Combat Infantryman's Badge says you were trained as infantry, and what was your mission? It wasn't to duck. Your mission was to go out and look for them, search and destroy, go out close and personal. So you went looking for trouble. You hunted the enemy because well, what is the mission of the infantry?

*The Marine Corps talks about the infantry's mission is to – go ahead and give me the Army's because it's probably similar. The Marine Corps' is to locate and destroy the enemy by fire maneuver.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Ours was kill, capture, and destroy the enemy by means of fire maneuver. That's out of the book, but that's what you get driven into your heart. That's what our mission is, to go look for them and kill them, and there's no civilian equivalent for 11 Bravo, right, except assassin. I mean that's basically what you do. And the thing that a lot of people realize is, I don't know if you're aware of it, but there are 58,260 men that were killed, 1 female killed by the way. Her name was Sharon Lane. I don't know if you're aware of that. Sharon Lane

happened to be the only female that was killed in the Vietnam War by possible fire. I'm just showing you something, Sharon Ann Lane. She was a nurse, first lieutenant. Guess which division she was assigned to?

*I'm guessing the Americal.*

**Fred Castaneda:** You got it. She was killed in Chulai in a 122 millimeter rocket attack. Seven rockets hit and she got shrapnel through the aorta. She was the only one. So 58,260 men were killed. She was killed, too. Do you know how many took their lives when they came home? There were more than 59,000 Vietnam vets that committed suicide because of the rejection of an ungrateful American public and also the way they were treated. They couldn't adjust. Let me tell you, adjusting at home, that was a tougher war than fighting in Vietnam, adjusting to an ungrateful American public that, you know, I couldn't get a job, you know what they said? We don't want any trouble. We don't hire Vietnam vets. We don't want baby killers, psychos and dope addicts. That's how we were classified because the media and the senators like Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, classified us that way. Couldn't get a job, went back to school because that's the only thing you could do. The VA were full of the people who used to be protesting. They got the jobs at the VA. So here, the folks that were in college during the time, they treat us like dirt as well. They didn't want to see us so the VA rejected us, and so a lot of guys just couldn't take it.

*That's too bad. Well I know it's years later, but this program is here to thank you for your service and sacrifice.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Well thank you for yours. You served, I mean anytime you go to war and it doesn't matter what responsibility or MOS or job you've got, whenever you're going to go in harm's way, it's always ugly. And when you get there and if you happen to be involved in the area where you are in harm's way or your buddies are in harm's way and you see what happens as a result of being in harm's way, it's always ugly. There's no glory in war, and the only thing about the guys who didn't make it is was put by the words of one British paratrooper who survived V-day, and he says don't glorify war. When you look at the guys who died, they gave up their tomorrows so that we can enjoy our todays, right? And that's the only way to think about it and we do on every Memorial Day.

*Well on behalf of Commissioner Patterson who also is a Vietnam veteran, and everybody here at the Land office, I just want to thank you for your service and sacrifice and letting us record a little bit of your memories and your story.*

**Fred Castaneda:** Thank you very much. I appreciate it. Airborne all the way.

*[End of recording]*